DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 428 401 CS 510 008

AUTHOR Olhauser, Jon; Olsen, Richard

TITLE The "Recordable" Situation: Reflections on Creating an Audio-Cassette-Based Course in Communication Studies for an MA Curriculum.

PUB DATE 1996-04-00

NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (New York, NY, April 11-13, 1996).

PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Audiotape Cassettes; *Curriculum Development; *Distance Education; Graduate Study; Higher Education; *Mass Media; *Masters Programs; *Speech Communication; Speech Curriculum; Student Needs

IDENTIFIERS Technology Integration

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a distance education course directly connected to a fundamental need at Regent University (a graduate-only institution) to equip ill-prepared students for the rigors of the Master of Arts degree in communication. This course was designed to be taken by any student whose undergraduate transcript did not adequately meet the institution's admittance standards. The course surveys the broad discipline of communication and addresses the major thematic challenges of describing, defining, and delineating various sub-disciplines of communication, including rhetoric, interpersonal communication, organization and group communication, intercultural communication, and mass communication. The course was first implemented on-site in Fall 1994, but the need became one of offering a premedial course in a way that did not interfere with the students' ability to move effectively and efficiently through their program. Distance education with audiocassettes was chosen as a viable method on a shoestring budget. The course has been good for Regent financially and as a valuable promotional tool. Advice from the audiocassette course's administrators and Regent's senior distance education producer is also offered, i.e.: do not create a distance education course using an instructor who is offering the onsite version; develop a committed "chain of authority"; be ready to invest appropriate time and money; be sure to think through the administrative timeline for not only producing the course but offering it again with new instructors; remember that the medium offers certain advantages and constraints; and preplan what to tape and what not to tape. Contains 7 references. (NKA)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

HE



RUNNING HEAD: The Recordable Situation

ED 428 401

# The *Recordable* Situation: Reflections on Creating an Audio-Cassette-Based Course in Communication Studies for an MA Curriculum

Jon Olhauser

Atlantic Baptist University

Johlhauser@ABU.NB.CA

Richard Olsen

University of North Carolina at Wilmington

olsenr@uncwil.edu

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS 510008

R. Olsen

# The *Recordable* Situation: Reflections on Creating an Audio-Cassette-Based Course in Communication Studies for an MA Curriculum

Distance education is a fairly contemporary phenomena in education. Correspondence courses and early use of radio did not foreshadow the recent trends in distance education as a means for universities to adapt to the changing definition of student and financial constraints on both the students and the institutions. Key to the development of distance education form and content has been the introduction of various technologies (for instance see Clark & Sugrue, 1990, McAleese and Unwin, 1988). Distance education is also a unique pedagogical environment (for instance Dillon & Walsh, 1992). Instructors are faced with at least two challenges: 1) how to take advantage of the unique characteristics of the medium(s) being used to bridge the distance, and 2) how to effectively compensate for the distance so that the student has indeed had an "educational experience." With various reviewing agencies, it is often necessary to demonstrate that this experience is similar to the traditional "classroom experience." This paper will examine the creation of an audio-cassette-based course, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, that was developed for the MA program at Regent University. In addition, the paper offers evaluation of the course from the perspective of those involved in its creation and a "second-generation" instructor who used the course without having been involved in its creation.

Much like the theoretical structure behind Lloyd Bitzer's (1968) rhetorical situation, our experience with the planning, production and distribution of a distance introductory course was somewhat tripartite in nature. Not only were we challenged to fulfill the exigence of preparing non-communication undergraduates for a graduate-level experience with the discipline, we were also confronted by the characteristics of our immediate and potential audiences, limited budget,

and other pragmatic requirements. His ideas are used below to help clarify the challenges of this project and how we met them.

The Exigence

The idea for our distance education course was directly connected to a fundamental need at Regent University to equip ill-prepared students for the rigors of Master of Arts degree in communication. Regent is a graduate-only institution and as such does not offer supporting and complimentary undergraduate programs. For a variety of reasons the College of Communication and the Arts attracts many individuals whose previous educational experience is not even remotely linked to the discipline of communication. Some of these individuals are older students who are returning to school to seek a degree that will compliment their professional experience and enhance their marketability, others have simply changed their personal interests and now desire a deeper understanding of the processes and theories of communication, finally, some come with a fine arts background and require further grounding in the other approaches to the study of communication. Because of the obvious disadvantages those students would have in their graduate courses, the administration and faculty wisely decided to establish a prerequisite/premedial course to be taken by any student whose undergraduate transcript did not adequately meet the institution's admittance standards.

The course surveys the broad discipline of communication and addresses the major thematic challenges of describing, defining and delineating the various sub-disciplines of communication including rhetoric, interpersonal communication, organization and group communication, intercultural communication, mass communication--including journalism, and

theatre arts (addressing both film and live theatre).[1] The course attempts to introduce the students to the breadth of the discipline while emphasizing the concentrations offered at Regent.

This introductory course was first offered on-site during the fall semester of 1994 with the understanding that those student who were required to take the course could not enroll in many other courses until it was completed. Responding to this limitation, many of the students expressed disappointment at this delay in their graduate program. Empathetic members of the faculty began to consider possible solutions to the problem. At the time, distance education appeared to offer the best resolution. If this program could be made available to the students in a format that could be completed before they arrived on site, the students could then begin their full program of study immediately upon taking residency. Thus the need became one of offering a premedial course in a way that did not interfere with the students' ability to move effectively and efficiently through their program.

Constraints

The logistics of accommodating our audience has been a fundamental constraint in the development of the course. A distance education course that allows the students to complete a requirement while maintaining their current residency status and employment is attractive. However, from an administrative perspective, distance is a definite challenge. Geographic distance, and student diversity are the greatest challenges. Cost and time are also significant.

Student diversity. The individual students for this distance education course bring various amounts and types of experience to the "classroom." Some have been professionals for a number of years while others are fresh from an undergraduate education. In addition, the breadth of

[1] This is but one way to make sense of the discipline. Another schema might organize the content around the major purposes of communication: to relate, to inform, to persuade. This schema was chosen because to reflects, to some extent, the historical developments of the field. It also offers a more intuitive means of getting at the breadth of the discipline. Finally, it is more consistent with the organization of other classes offered at Regent University.

concentrations offered at Regent means that students are getting their MA for a variety of reasons as well. In an effort to catch the interests and needs of the students--no matter where they stand professionally or educationally--the course has been structured with many "hands-on" exercises that allow the student to actively interact with the concepts and perspectives offered on the recordings. While there are direct lectures, students are encouraged to incorporate personal experiences and interests with the material as it relates to their focused area of study.

Geography and Technology. To overcome the obstacles of distance, we have tried to minimize the amount of transactions that must be made via the postal delivery system. While the idea of offering this class on the internet is attractive, we decided against it for several reasons. First, this technology is not yet a "given" for many students and is expensive. Second, they would not necessarily need this technology to complete the rest of the degree since they would becoming to campus. Third, the audio cassettes have some advantages with respect to lecturing and being able to tape other faculty and members so the students can "meet" them ahead of time. In our opinion, a voice--albeit a recorded one--is a bit more personal then a font.

Once the student has enrolled in the class, all the materials except the final examination are mailed to them. The deadline for registration is set one week before the projected timeline contained in the packet is to begin. This allows the College to use the slower, but less costly, postal system instead of a courier service. However, one advantage of administering materials this way is that late registrations can be easily accommodated.

Once the students receive the materials they are free to begin the course at their leisure (see Appendix A for samples of workbook assignments and layout). However, there is a strict course timetable for each set of assignments and the final examination. A foundational strategy learned early in our experience with this course is to anticipate *all* problems and to address them

in such a way that students cannot use ambiguity or problems with course material as an excuse for delinquent assignments. The dynamics of distance education seem to encourage such excuse making.

Student assignments and the final examination are grouped into four different sets. Upon completion of each set (which covers the material of three or four course units), the students must mail them to Regent and the package must be postmarked by the preset deadline in order to avoid late penalties. The material is promptly graded and returned to the student within a week . This allows the student to feel some immediacy and to gauge the appropriateness of their work in time to make adjustments before the next set of assignments is due. If the work is well below expectations, the instructor calls the student to discuss the deficiencies and how to correct them.

In a further attempt to accommodate distance students, the on-site instructor has established formal office hours that are sensitive to different time-zones if necessary. All acceptable ways of contacting the instructor must be made very clear in the student materials. If the student calls the instructor, our policy is for the instructor to call the student back so that the University pays for the call. This cost is anticipated in the fees charged for the course. If the instructor is not there, the student may utilize an established voice-mail system. An important side note: Despite making e-mail available as a way of contacting the instructor none of the students who have registered thus far have had the capability or inclination to do so indicating there still may be a place for non-internet based curriculum.

Time and Money. Working with a shoe-string budget, our plan required the instructor to get involved in the successful implementation of this course to a greater degree than usual. The instructor not only lead the class discussion and presented the primary material, he also produced, edited, and packaged the final product including the accompanying written materials.

While there was some technical assistance in the physical splicing and editing, the willingness of the instructor to do all that he did for a nominal fee saved the College a great deal of money and made the course possible within the budget constraints. The costs for this course beyond the instructor fees ran only three-thousand dollars. A main reason for this is that we were able to barter the use of some of our equipment for classroom-studio time. An engineer was paid an almost ceremonial wage of six dollars an hour. Jeff Anderson, the senior producer of distance education materials at Regent stated that a typical 3-hour course today would cost approximately six-thousand dollars:

Engineer to tape lectures, etc. $3,800
Producers $1,200
Equipment fee $1,000
Materials (usually absorbed by other fees) $400

Our financial situation also influenced the form at of the course. While many distance education courses depend on a video format or more advanced technologies, our finances limited us solely to an audio production. A well laid-out and direct student manual along with activities that asked the student to evaluate visual artifacts accessible to them helped address the need for a visual connection. Despite the "default" nature of our selection, audio-cassette offers several advantages that are relevant to our goals. It is an inexpensive media to use and most students already have the necessary equipment. It is also a very portable format. The Regent School of Business has had a lot of positive feedback about their cassette-based courses centering on this characteristic. Their students are often sales staff that travel a lot and military personnel who can take the course while on the ocean or below it! Commutes, jogging, etc. are all potential times when the tape can be listened to. Finally, it can be somewhat personal. The course contains a

selection of faculty interviews that form part of the instruction and allow some "contact" to be made.

In addition to money, a time factor also directed us toward an audio-only course. The decision to created a distance version of this course was made just prior to the start of the fall semester. Since the administration desired a finished product very soon after the end of the semester audio was a prudent choice. Regent already has a room designed for the audio taping class sessions and thus start-up logistics were also minimal. The potential drawback to this approach is that the lecture/discussion approach that works rather well for the on-site classroom is not uniquely suited for audio-cassette material.

In addition to these obvious constraints, we also experienced some that were less anticipated. The instructor and the administration were inexperienced in the pedagogy, production and distribution of distance education materials. Fortunately, the business school at Regent was well-equipped with respect to production and packaging of such courses and they served as an important source of council. Apprehension on the part of the many faculty and students was also apparent. Students were not aware before registering for the class that their comments and discussion would be recorded for future use. Having to sit in front of a live microphone along with signing a release form made many of the students timid at the outset.

This timidity was overcome primarily with two pedagogical strategies. First, the size of the recorded class was rather small--only nine student. This size allowed members to get to know each other quickly, a task encouraged by the instructor early in the semester. In addition, the personality and teaching style of the instructor also fostered a high level of class participation. Any future endeavors should incorporate time for students and instructors to feel comfortable under the recording conditions.

Finally, a hurdle had to be cleared with the accrediting body of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. According to their guidelines, any distance education course must mirror the experience of a student taking the same material while in residence. This encouraged our decision to record the on-site class as it happened naturally rather than creating a new "studioized" version of the course. In addition, the assignments and activities and readings are the same for both versions of the course. To date we have had no negative reaction from the accrediting agency.

## Going the Distance II: Taking Over a Course You Didn't Create

While there are many advantages to a distance education program, there is no hiding the reality that it has also been good for the institution financially. Rather than full-time faculty members teaching the course on-site, Regent has been able to offer the course using Ph.D. teaching fellows. Another advantages of a distance course is that it can be administrated by others with far less energy than it took to create the original course. If the up-front work is done correctly then assignments, readings, and lecture content all work together to facilitate student learning in subsequent semesters. When we offered the course with a new instructor there were relatively few costs. More of the cassettes, workbooks and textbooks must be ordered, packaged and mailed, but few other costs exist beyond the administration, grading, and holding office hours. However, while the financial costs drop off significantly, taking over a distance course is not without drawbacks.

One of the difficulties is that the transition from one instructor to another seems as simple as described in the above paragraph. When one of the authors took over the course he was ignorant of the administrative actions necessary to get the distance section running smoothly. Letters of acceptance, coordinating registration, payment and the shipment of materials, etc. At

the time, Regent kept distance sections and on-site sections very distinct with respect to the ordering of textbooks so the procedure learned for offering on-site classes was incorrect for distance. These may seem like small things but they become big when the student in Florida who has paid for a class is waiting on materials that have been designed with a strict timeline!

Another more ongoing difficulty arose because of the SACS mandate for parallel experiences in the on-site and distance sections. The content of the audio lectures and workbook somewhat constrain the flexibility of the new on-campus instructors. Many of us have experienced the frustration of finding several textbooks that were close but not perfect fits to what we wanted to do in the classroom. Taking over a distance course has a similar feel. The course is sound and logical, but it is not my unique logic, etc.

One of the decisions we have made to combat the blind spots of those taking over the distance section is to create a checklist/timeline for various tasks so that it is clear what should be done when. This will be especially important for those instructors who are simultaneously preparing to offer the course on-site and administrate the distance course.

One further note, while this course was originally designed to equip incoming students and familiarize them with the field of communication and our graduate program, we have also seen value in this course as a promotional took. The course has been offered to prospects as a way of helping them and us determine, before making the commitment to on-site enrollment, whether or not an advanced degree in communication is really for them.

## Shoulda. Woulda. Coulda and the Future of *Communication 504*

This section offers a collection of practical conclusions and advice we have gleaned from the process of creating and administrating an audio-cassette-based course at the graduate level and from discussions with Regent's senior distance education producer, Jeff Anderson.

First, do not create a distance education course using an instructor who is offering the onsite version c packet. Third, develop a committed "chain of authority." This is a serious project that has the potential to be a future source of revenue for the university but can only do so if it is of high quality and that takes up-front commitment. Fourth, be ready to invest appropriate time and money. Remember many of these expenses are one-time expenses so invest up front and make the course what you wish it would be. Fifth, be sure to think through the administrative timeline for not only producing the course but offering it again with new instructors. That's the whole point of getting it right the first time. The cost and time for developing these materials should be included and not be relegated to an afterthought. Be sure to keep several "masters" of course material (especially packet) in hard copy and on disc so that revisions and additions can be made as easily as possible. Finally, remember that the medium offers certain advantages and certain constraints. Class discussion, which is a more active process for the on-site students is a fairly passive one for distance students. Straightforward lecture with rhetorical questions is more active for the distance student. A one-hour active class experience might be reduced to a 20 minute lecture coordinated with an activity from the workbook. This distillation would make room for a more diverse collection of "applications" as noted below.

Jeff Anderson had several suggestions for those considering developing a distance course. First, he stressed the importance of pre-planning of what to tape and what not to tape. It is important that the instructor realize that tape time is money and the more your tape the more

you must edit. Create an outline and stick to it. Related to this planning is of course the identification of clear instructional objectives for each segment. Since the segment will be on tape you'll know if you hit them! Second, the instructor must listen to the tape and help direct the editing. Third--and this is directly related to the up front costs and time necessary--integrate "applications" or "enhancements" into the course. One of the luxuries of taping is that an interview with an outside resource (academic expert, practitioner, ethnographic interviews, etc.) need only take place once to be used every semester. Other enhancements included staged question and answer sessions that reinforce or cover material not clearly covered in the class session and dramatizations of class studies. Fourth, be sure to relax and speak naturally-remember the old radio adage; speak to one solitary listener at a time and not a "mass audience. Finally, (remember Jeff is a producer), cooperate with the producers. Trust their expertise and work with them.

There are plans to revise the course in the near future. In light of student feedback and our experience we will probably go with a bit more studio-based course that emphasizes interviews with faculty and lecture rather than lecture and discussion. In addition, we hope to increase the integration of enhancements such as interviews with international students, practitioners, and dramatizations. The course currently consists of 17 cassettes and we hope to reduce that number significantly while shifting the workload even more toward activities and away from passive listening.

## Conclusion

The advantages to distance education are many for both the institution and the student. Audio-cassette is an inexpensive but effective way to deliver course materials. As with any curriculum the preparation is vital to the success of the course. Proper planning that forces the

student to be an active learner and takes advantage of the positive characteristics of audiocassette can help ensure that a distance education is not a second-class education.

References

Anderson, J (1996) Interview. March 13, 1996.

Bitzer, L. (1968). The rhetorical situation. Philosophy and Rhetoric. 1. -1-15.

Clark, R. E. (1992). Classroom implementation of media. In M. C. Alkin (Ed.), **Encyclopedia** of Educational Research. (Vol. 3, p. 805). New York: Macmillan.

Clark, R. E. & Sugrue, B. M. (1990). North American disputes about research on learning from media. I

Dillon, C. L. & Walsh, S. M. (1992). Faculty: The neglected resource in distance education. The American Journal of Distance Education, 6, 3, 5-21.

McAleese, R., and Unwin, D. (Ed.) (1988). Encyclopedia of education media communications and technology (2nd ed.). New York: Greenwood.